

CHAPTER VII:

HISTORIC AREAS PLAN

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INTRODUCTION

The historic structures defining Downtown Smithfield have long served as a source of pride within the community, and as such, historic preservation has been given high priority in the Town in recent decades. This tradition continues today in Smithfield as local residents, property owners, businesses and the Town government invest valuable resources in the preservation of historic structures. This Historic Areas Plan attempts to capture the spirit of the Town's commitment to protecting and preserving its past through historic preservation by summarizing past and ongoing efforts, as well as introducing specific recommendations for future planning efforts. Incorporated in 1752, the oldest section of the Town was originally established on a slight crest along a bend in the Pagan River, encompassing the blocks which now constitute South Church, Main, Mason and Cedar streets. While early settlement centered around the courthouse and wharf area, new growth in the area led to the geographic expansion of new development beyond the Downtown Area. Eventually, the original grid pattern street design was abandoned as new streets were designed to fit within the constraints imposed by the Pagan River, Little Creek and their adjacent marshlands. As Smithfield has evolved, the Downtown has witnessed periods of both economic prosperity and discouraging economic times when several established businesses relocated to outlying highway sites. Through these various turns in the Town's economic cycle, Downtown Smithfield has managed to retain a historically significant building stock and a strong sense of community cohesiveness. Historic preservation and revitalization efforts undertaken over the past twenty-five years have played a major role in preserving the integrity of the Downtown Area.

Smithfield is home to one of the most unique and extensive collections of historic buildings in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Main Street area is comprised of a variety of vernacular commercial structures dating from around the turn of the century. The residential areas which surround the Downtown contain a number of high-style Georgian, Federal and Victorian homes, and thus incorporate structures from a broad time frame which help to tell the story of the Town's evolution. The following section will provide an overview of the Smithfield Historic Preservation Overlay District which is recognized at both the national and local levels.

DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

Downtown Smithfield has traditionally functioned as the "heart" of the community, and its health and character are reflective of the Town's values and its prospects for the future. Over the past several years, the community has done much to maintain its rich architectural heritage. Smithfield citizens and business leaders have developed and implemented a number of strategies to help revitalize the appearance and economic health of the downtown. A brief review of past historic preservation and revitalization efforts is provided below.

Formal historic preservation efforts in Smithfield began in the early 1970's when the Town commissioned an architectural survey identifying significant historic properties in the area. This survey led to the development of the Smithfield National Register Historic District in 1973. During the early part of the decade, an alarming number of businesses began to leave Downtown Smithfield for outlying highway locations, and Main Street began to suffer from a changing economic environment. Downtown property owners became cautious about reinvestment, building maintenance was often neglected and public areas and infrastructure began to show signs of age and disrepair. In spite of these trends, Downtown Smithfield retained a number of important characteristics that enabled it to survive this difficult period including: a historically significant building stock, few actual vacancies, a strong office/professional service presence and a growing tourism trade.

SMITHFIELD HISTORIC PRESERVATION OVERLAY DISTRICT

Realizing that the ultimate responsibility for protecting the integrity of the Downtown Area, even during the most challenging of economic times, would be borne by individual property owners and the local government, the Town enacted a Historic Preservation District Ordinance in 1979. The purpose of the ordinance is to maintain, preserve, protect and enhance the architectural excellence, cultural significance, economic vitality, visual quality and historic importance of the Town of Smithfield. The district is designed to protect designated landmarks and other historic or architectural features and their surroundings from destruction, damage, and the incompatible development of adjacent lands. The ordinance also established formal boundaries for a local historic district roughly comparable with the National Register District and created an architectural review board to review proposed new construction and alterations to existing structures in the district.

Prior to 1991, the boundaries of the Smithfield National Historic District were located slightly inside those of the Local Historic District. However, these boundaries have since been expanded to include Riverview, Cedar Street, the open space west of Cary Street and the farmland surrounding Windsor Castle. As a result, the boundaries of the two districts now coincide. The Smithfield Historic Preservation Overlay District encompasses 295 acres and is bounded by the Pagan River on the north, Cypress Creek on the east, the Windsor Castle tree line and southern marshlands on the south, and Route 10 on the west (see the map presented on the following page). The district is further divided into six sub-areas which represent certain styles or eras that are representative of the development patterns witnessed over time in Smithfield.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION OVERLAY DISTRICT SUBAREAS

Smithfield's Local Historic District is divided into six distinct neighborhoods or sub-areas, which are marked with their own unique architectural styles and characteristics that are representative of the development patterns witnessed over time in Smithfield. These sub-areas include:

- Riverview/James/Cary Streets;
- North Church Street;
- Main and Grace Streets;
- Commercial Main Street;
- South Church Street; and
- Cedar Street

A map presented on the following page identifies these sub-areas graphically, and the following section provides a summary of the history and architectural character of each subarea.

1. Riverview/James/Cary Streets Historic Planning Sub-Area:

This subarea is located within the district's western half and encompasses Riverview Avenue and Washington Street and the north ends of James, Clay, North Mason and Cary streets. Riverview Avenue and Washington Street contain a number of one- and one-half story dwellings set close to the road. Recently, sections of the area have been paved and have had curbs installed. Private landscaping in the area is minimal, and consists mainly of a few mature trees and foundation plantings. The residences located on James and Cary streets are larger and set farther back from the road. A variety of architectural styles dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be found within this subarea, including notable examples of highly decorative Victorian-era homes.

2. North Church Street Historic Planning Subarea

This northwestern subarea encompasses North Church Street from the Pagan River to Main Street; Commerce Street; and Thomas Street from North Church Street to Commerce Street. The majority of the area is commercial and includes several warehouses and a small shopping center. Landscaping in the area is minimal and several buildings are vacant.

3. Main and Grace Streets Historic Planning Subarea

This subarea is located within the center of the district and contains several well-maintained, medium- to large-scale residences, many of which are a variation of Victorian styles. The majority of these dwellings are two stories in height, set close to the road, with large backyards and manicured lawns. Sidewalks are located on both sides of Grace Street, with a row of mature trees between the walkway and the street. Several noncontributing commercial buildings, fronted

by parking lots, are located at the west end of Main Street near Route 10. Pierceville Farm, one of the Smithfield Historic District's two major farm sites, is located in this subarea. The farm buildings sit quite close to the bend in Grace Street, while the remainder of the land is in open space.

4. Commercial Main Street Historic Planning Subarea

This subarea encompasses the traditional Downtown Area dating from around the turn of the century. The majority of the contributing commercial buildings are two-story brick structures with little or no setback, while residences tend to have small, landscaped front yards. Several of the lots have been converted to parking areas, predominantly beside the noncontributing buildings. Sidewalks line both sides of Main Street, and parallel parking is permitted as well. Hayden's Lane, a notable passageway in the subarea, provides an attractive walkway from Main to Grace streets.

5. South Church Street Historic Planning Subarea

This northeastern subarea possesses some of the most attractive residences and finest examples of Georgian, Federal and Victorian architecture in Smithfield. Wetlands define the edges of the Church Street corridor at the south end of the subarea, providing owners with long lots, extending back to these conservation areas. In general, residences are sited in close proximity to one another. The narrow width of Church Street cannot support much on-street parking; however, the deep lots described above allow for private driveways. Sections of the subarea are lined with mature trees which provide a natural canopy over the road. Landscape and building maintenance in the subarea is characterized as good to excellent, and a variety of architectural styles and decorative detail contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the neighborhood. Windsor Castle, the second of Smithfield's historical farm sites, is located on Jericho Road in this subarea, and is visible from South Church Street. This property, which contains the main house and an extensive collection of outbuildings, is cherished within the community, and the Town has placed a high priority on preserving the integrity of this historic property.

6. Cedar Street Historic Planning Subarea

This subarea is located east of Main Street and is characterized by a mixture of residential, institutional and business uses. A narrow sidewalk lines the south side of Cedar Street; however, sidewalks are absent on the side streets. Parking lots associated with the Main Street business area front on Cedar Street. The east end of the street contains several church parking lots, while the west end is comprised of several multi-family buildings. The neighborhood's cross streets contain small, two-story dwellings set on narrow lots with minimal landscaping. South Mason and Sykes streets are comprised of small residences as well; however, a majority of these are one-story dwellings, on well-maintained lots with foundation plantings.

The creation of the Historic Preservation Overlay District allowed for an additional layer of protection to historic areas, buildings, monuments or other architecturally significant features or structures in the Town. The ordinance included general design guidelines to provide direction to the review board during the regulatory process. However, the review board soon came to realize that these generic guidelines provided insufficient guidance during its process of determining the appropriateness of any new construction, reconstruction, exterior alteration or restoration within the historic district. As a result, in 1990 the Town set out to establish more specific design guidelines to offer the review board guidance in defining what is “appropriate” with respect to a wide range of factors, including building mass, scale and construction materials. The result of this process was the adoption of Smithfield Virginia Historic District Design Guidelines which establish formal design and development standards for new construction, renovation and redevelopment projects in the Historic District. The goal of these guidelines is to ensure the compatibility of such projects with the architectural and historical quality, character and scale of the buildings which comprise the district. As a result of the adoption of these guidelines, such actions are assessed by the board based upon their compatibility with the design, development standards and criteria as outlined in the guidelines.

While the Town was developing the Historic District Design Guidelines, a non-profit organization, Historic Downtown Smithfield Inc. (HDS), was established to promote the revitalization of the Smithfield Central Business District. In 1990 HDS solicited input from Downtown businesses, property owners and other Town residents on their perceptions regarding the Downtown Area and its future. As a result of this survey, HDS published a booklet entitled Smithfield: A Time, A Place, Reborn which summarizes its findings and introduced formal goals and objectives for Downtown revitalization. The five major priorities for downtown revitalization as outlined by HDS are as follows:

- 1. The health of the downtown as the center of Smithfield is essential to the community's cohesiveness and strength.*
- 2. Main Street must adapt to the changes in business, shifting to service, office and specialty shopping.*
- 3. Downtown property owners are reluctant to renovate buildings because of overall blight.*
- 4. The street needs a long-overdue facelift, primarily in the public areas: the sidewalks, curbing and lighting.*
- 5. Funds will have to be raised through a partnership between residents, businesses and the government.*

HDS's efforts in the early 1990's spurred the Town to begin a multi-phased downtown revitalization project. Through this project, improvements were made to sidewalks, lighting, landscaping features, drainage and the visual impact of utility lines along the segment of Main Street which stretches from Commerce Street to Underwood Lane. The Main Street beautification Improvements, completed in 1998, were made possible through funding by the Town of Smithfield, Smithfield Foods, a federal ISTEA grant

and business support. The Town won an award of merit in 1999 from the Virginia Downtown Development Association.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRESERVATION PLANNING

While Smithfield has been extremely proactive in successfully implementing historic preservation strategies within its Historic Area, several opportunities exist to expand the protection of the Town's historic resources and to increase public awareness of the additional opportunities in preservation and rehabilitation that exist in the area. The following sections provide a brief summary of future efforts which may be undertaken in order to continue to enhance the visual and historic character of the district.

Proposed Entrance Corridor Protection District

The Town is currently in the process of assessing the future of its major entrance corridors. In Smithfield, entrance corridors are important transition passages and serve as gateways to historic areas. Therefore, these corridors should provide visual clues which indicate one's entrance to the historic area, and contribute significantly to the visual and historic character of the community. Virginia law allows localities to establish overlay zoning districts along its major entrance corridors providing they offer direct access to defined historic areas and/or tourism areas. It is recommended that the Town takes advantage of this provision in Virginia law to establish a formal Entrance Corridor Overlay zoning district along its five identified principle entranceways as part of the Town's ongoing effort to plan for the future of its corridors. This new Entrance Corridor Overlay zoning district would augment the Town's successful historic preservation efforts by serving to mark distinct entrance points to the historic area, preserve viewsheds and important landmark views, guide development and ensure compatibility with existing zoning, conserve the natural, historical, and architectural character of the district and finally, define a visual identity for the district. Although the Smithfield Historic Preservation Overlay District does not identify specific entrance corridors to the town, the five corridors cited below may be defined as routes warranting further study and consideration as Corridor Protection Districts.

- *Route 258 from the west;*
- *State Route 10 Bypass from the north;*
- *State Route 10 Business from the north;*
- *State Route 10/U.S. Route 258 from the south; and*
- *Battery Park Road (Route 669) from the east*

The recommended corridor assessment should address issues such as landscaping and signage standards, appropriate locations for utilities, roadway scale, edge conditions and improved public safety and pedestrian access. The overlay district should seek to achieve the following objectives with respect to protecting the Town's major entrance corridors:

- *Provide visual clues which draw visitors to the Historic Area.*
- *Create a strong sense of arrival to the historic area through the use of distinctive signage.*
- *Achieve consistency in streetscape through simplicity of design and repetition of common landscape and streetscape elements.*
- *Create a set of design standards similar to the Smithfield Virginia: Historic District Design Guidelines, which is tailored to address entrance corridor objectives, providing guidance for building and landscaping improvements within these transitional zones.*

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

The development of additional public education and awareness programs would help to inform residents and visitors as to the variety of historic resources which exist in Smithfield. Several new programs may be implemented in order to accomplish this goal. Walking tours which provide a sense of community history and highlight architectural focal points within the Town often serve as a valuable means to increase awareness of historic resources and encourage public participation. While one such tour is currently offered in the Town, it is hoped that this tour could be extended beyond the core of the historic district to incorporate additional sites such as the Windsor Castle estate, which deserve greater attention. Additional opportunities exist to introduce eco-tourism tours incorporating a historical theme within and through the many waterways that are found in Smithfield.

A series of public workshops were held in the Town in 1997 to provide owners of historic properties with guidance in the areas of building maintenance, renovation and restoration through a grant from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. The National Park Service publishes a series of technical briefs which provide assistance in choosing the proper materials for building repairs which meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. These briefs are made available to property owners so as to ensure that building improvements preserve the integrity of individual buildings and contribute to the character of the historic district as a whole. Property owners are also made aware of the federal tax credits available for the rehabilitation of income-producing properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places or located within National Register Historic Districts. Fundraising strategies should be implemented which would enable the town to purchase important historic and cultural resources, such as Windsor Castle. Possible funding sources may include private contributions, donations from corporate sponsors and community fundraising activities.

PROMOTING PRESERVATION INCENTIVES

Owners of income-producing properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places or located within the Smithfield National Register Historic District may be eligible for a twenty percent federal tax credit for rehabilitation projects which meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings. In order to qualify for tax credits a structure must be deemed a "certified historic structure" by the Secretary of the Interior, and thereby contribute to the historic character of the district in which it is located. The Town should actively promote these programs among residents and property owners within the Historic District.

For FY 1999, a twenty percent State tax credit is available as well to any individual, trust or estate or corporation incurring eligible expenses in the rehabilitation of a "certified historic structure." This credit will increase by five percent in FY 2000 when it levels off at twenty-five percent. Properties must be "certified historic structures", but do not need to be income-producing, and may qualify as owner-occupied residences. The credit is applied to improvements or reconstruction consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Project expenses must total at least fifty percent of local real estate tax assessed value for the year before rehabilitation expenses were incurred.

The rehabilitation tax credit is calculated as a percentage of the eligible expenses which include: architectural and engineering fees, site survey fees, legal expenses, insurance premiums, developer's fees, and other construction-related soft costs. Applications must be filed with the VDHR and approved before construction and rehabilitation efforts begin. Property owners should contact the Town of Smithfield Department of Planning and Zoning, P. O. Box 246, 310 Institute Street, Smithfield, Virginia 23430, (804) 357-3247 and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, located at 2801 Kensington Avenue, Richmond, Virginia, 23221, (804) 367-2323 for more information on federal tax credit programs and project expenses eligible for reimbursement.

State designation of historic properties provides eligibility for several programs administered through the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Grant programs, when available, provide funds to owners of threatened landmark properties, and to non-profit groups for work on historic properties. The State also accepts donations of preservation easements from owners listed in the Virginia Landmarks Register. Under this program the owner can claim the value of easements as charitable contributions for tax purposes in exchange for preserving the property in perpetuity. The Town of Smithfield may also consider developing a local tax abatement program which would relieve property owners of property tax increases for certain time periods following the rehabilitation of historic properties as an added incentive for preservation efforts.

CONTINUED TOWN STAFF SUPPORT

Throughout the successful past of Smithfield's historic preservation efforts, the Town Staff has played a crucial role in promoting the ongoing effort, informing local residents and property owners of opportunities, assisting the Board of Historic and Architectural Review in administering the regulations of the Historic District and monitoring maintenance of both public and private properties within the district. In order to ensure the continued success of the historic preservation effort in Smithfield, the Town Staff should continue to provide its valuable assistance in the future planning and implementation of preservation strategies in the Historic District. More specifically, Town Staff should continue to be diligent in the maintenance of an up-to-date inventory of the Town's Historic Properties. Staff should also continue to maintain its excellent standard in providing property owners with ongoing technical assistance and guidance in the areas of building maintenance, renovation and restoration, as well as information on tax credits available for rehabilitations to income-producing properties. Furthermore, the Town Staff could expand its role in historic preservation by working together with HDS to promote and conduct fundraising activities in order to support the preservation of historic and architectural resources. The continuation of proactive Staff support in the process will be critical in ensuring that the momentum of past historic preservation efforts is carried forward into the new millennium.